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Recent Developments  
in and related to the

AGRICULTURAL  
CONSERVATION  
PROGRAM

for the  
ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SOIL  
AND WATER CONSERVATION



United States Department of Agriculture  
Agricultural Conservation Program Service  
Washington, D. C. - October 1956



We appreciate the questions discussed and the counsel given us by the Committee in your previous meeting. We invite your frank comments and viewpoints again at this meeting and at any time, on the best methods of accomplishing the objectives of the conservation legislation and programs under which the ACP Service has responsibility.

## 2. Legislative Developments in 1956

The Congress appropriated sufficient funds to fully carry out the 1956 program and authorized a regular 1957 Agricultural Conservation Program of \$250,000,000. The 1957 program authorization is at the same level as for 1955 and 1956. Congressional committee reports on the 1957 fiscal year appropriation act urged the Department to take appropriate steps along these lines:

- a. "...review and modify its requirements on conservation practices to encourage farmer participation, and to institute changes in practices to liberalize the program."
- b. "...review its operating policy on practices for terracing and pasture improvement for small farmers, and where possible amend regulations for qualifying for these practices."
- c. "...revise its procedures in making and revising program fund allocations to counties to meet changes in local conditions, as well as to compensate farmers in counties where conservation practices have exceeded the amounts heretofore allowed."
- d. "...correct such problems and use such carryover funds as may be necessary to carry out in 1956 the full program of \$250,000,000 announced by the Congress."

The Congress also extended the authorized period of federal operation of the Agricultural Conservation Program to December 31, 1959, the eighth such extension by Congressional action (for periods ranging from two to five years) since the original legislation was enacted in 1936. During the 21 years that States have had authority to take action to administer the ACP, enabling legislation has been enacted by and is still effective in 25 States and two Insular Areas. However, only one State plan for State operation of ACP has been submitted to the Secretary (December 1951) and it was inadequate.

The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act was amended, effective August 7, 1956, to provide for a Great Plains Conservation Program. Authorization is given for farmer-Government contracts to provide cost-sharing assistance, during the contract period, for carrying out soil and water conservation measures needed in installing a planned long-term program of conservation and land use adjustment.

Other legislation under which the ACPS has direct or cooperating responsibilities, includes the Soil Bank Act of 1956 and authorizations related to emergency conservation in areas suffering natural disasters such as floods, hurricanes, and severe wind erosion.

Some of these matters are treated in other items of this statement.

## THE AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION PROGRAM

This statement deals with recent developments in the Agricultural Conservation Program (ACP) and closely related activities with which the Agricultural Conservation Program Service (ACPS) is concerned.

It supplements the information on the Agricultural Conservation Program which was compiled at the request of the Advisory Committee on Soil and Water Conservation and mailed to all committee members under the date January 18, 1956.

The subjects briefly dealt with in this statement are:

1. Background Statement
2. Legislative Developments in 1956
3. 1957 ACP as compared with 1956 ACP
4. Operational Changes and Emphasis for More Effectiveness
5. Accomplishments Under 1955 ACP and Outlook for 1956 and 1957
6. Trends in Sharing Conservation Costs with Farmers and Ranchers
7. Emergency Conservation Work in 1956
8. Conservation Reserve Program of the Soil Bank
9. Great Plains Conservation Program
10. National Inventory of Soil and Water Conservation Needs

### 1. Background Statement

In our interim statement on the Agricultural Conservation Program sent to the Committee last January, we pointed out that the ACP is "a means by which the public through its Government shares the cost with farmers and ranchers of conservation practices (a) that are needed, and (b) that would not be carried out to a desired extent by farmers themselves using only their own resources." We also listed some things that ACP is and some that it is not.

In carrying out regular ACPS responsibilities for the ACP and helping to do several additional assigned jobs of a closely related nature, we have kept clearly before us certain feelings expressed by several of your members last year. For example, we have continued to emphasize the carrying out of longer lasting types of conservation practices such as contour strip cropping, terracing, gully control, establishing long-term vegetative cover, tree planting, and the construction of various water-impounding and water-saving structures. We have been mindful of the distinction between the stabilization features and the conservation features in the Department's programs with which we are concerned. And we have tried to be sure that ACP cost-sharing especially encourages enduring conservation systems of farming and remains distinctly conservation cost-sharing and does not become income supplement payments.

Recognizing that cost-sharing is closely related to and an interdependent part of the total conservation effort, the ACP Service has spent much time and effort during the last three years in trying to bring about a better understanding of these interrelationships. We have consulted in regional meetings for developing the ACP and Conservation Reserve Program practices, with State representatives of the USDA agencies with ACP responsibilities. We have consulted in the field with many Federal, State and local agencies and organizations which have soil, water, timber, range and wildlife conservation responsibilities. And we placed greater emphasis in all of our contacts with cooperating agencies, the administering State and local committees, and farmers and ranchers, on better relating ACP cost-sharing to the solution of the more urgent conservation problems, on a sound technical basis.

### 3. 1957 ACP as Compared with 1956 ACP

The general program principles for 1957 (stated in Section 1 of the attached 1957 Program Bulletin) are essentially the same as for 1956, except for principle 7. The few changes made are intended to carry out more effectively (a) the Department's continuing emphasis on utilizing its services to bring about the accomplishment of additional needed conservation and (b) the recommendations of the Conference Report on the 1957 appropriation act that the Department review and modify its requirements on conservation practices to encourage farmer participation and institute changes in practices to liberalize the program. State group recommendations on proposed changes were used extensively in the development of the 1957 program.

The revised principle 7 authorizes practice assistance for measures which, near the end of the usual life span of a practice, will materially extend its life. Authority was also given to replace a practice which has served its life span (after appropriate maintenance by the farmer). Approval can be given in such cases provided the county committee, after taking into account the conservation problems not yet dealt with on the farm, determines that appropriate replacement would merit and require public cost-sharing.

Most of the other changes are designed to provide for greater authority for local adaptation of program and practice provisions, fully within the general program principles, including the establishment of rates of cost-sharing considered necessary by State and county groups to get the desired level of performance of needed conservation. More than ever before, the agencies and organizations with assigned or advisory responsibilities for the ACP (see Sections 4 and 5 of the 1957 Bulletin) have actively contributed to the development of its provisions.

### 4. Operational Changes and Emphasis for More Effectiveness

States have been given guidance in putting into effect the authorized program changes for the 1957 ACP, referred to above. This guidance is to insure (a) an understanding of the changes and the principles involved and (b) the maintenance of program policies and the limitations which are legally or administratively necessary.

Also in line with Congressional recommendations outlined in item 2 above and Departmental policy designed to obtain more program effectiveness, we have reemphasized the following:

- a. Concurrent operation of two programs in the fall of the year to provide the maximum flexibility essential to full utilization of needed, available funds.
- b. Utilization by State offices of their authority to allocate and reallocate funds among counties to get a maximum of conservation accomplishment.
- c. Periodic reporting from counties so that State offices will know the current progress of the program and can better take corrective actions necessary.

Particular emphasis is being given to (a) coordinated program planning among local agencies with conservation responsibilities and (b) utilization on a fully coordinated and integrated basis of the phases of conservation programs administered by ASC Committees.

More direct program assistance to State offices has been assigned to the Administrator's Field Review Staff, and its individual members have been given more program counseling and follow-up responsibilities in the field.

##### 5. Accomplishments under 1955 ACP and Outlook for 1956 and 1957

Examples of conservation accomplishments with ACP cost-sharing (a) under the 1954 program, (b) under the 1955 program, and (c) during the 20 completed program years (1936-1955) ACP has been in operation, are shown on an attached sheet.

Total program accomplishments in 1955 swung upward over 1954 when our program authorizations were less. This upward swing was true with respect to a substantial number of the practices, including the construction of standard and diversion and spreader terraces, establishing permanent sod waterways and strip cropping, control of competitive shrubs on range and pasture, tree planting, liming materials applied for conserving purposes, and the establishment of vegetative cover. On the other hand, there was no gain on some, including storage dams and reservoirs and leveling land to conserve irrigation water and prevent erosion.

Over all, the 1955 program was used on farms representing over one-third of all farmland. It is estimated that about 20 million acres were directly benefited by these practices. This acreage included the establishment of about 13 million acres of grass and legume cover and trees. During the 20 years of the ACP, about 1-1/2 million acres of trees have been planted and about 1-1/3 million dams and reservoirs constructed with ACP cost-sharing, on privately owned farm land. A great percentage of the extensive water storage constructed and cover established, with ACP cost-sharing, provides direct or indirect benefits for fish and wildlife. The program encourages such multiple benefits where they are possible.

Encouragement is given to have requests for cost-sharing related to conservation farm plans, and a large percentage of participating farmers and ranchers use ACP cost-sharing to make more rapid strides in their admirable progress toward installing the practices recommended in their farm plans. This has been especially true in many organized upstream watershed protection and flood prevention projects.

The Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation State committees have recently estimated that the total number of participants in 1956 would be more than 15 percent above the number in 1955, with almost all States and areas anticipating some increase. This estimated increase is anticipated despite continuing severe drought in some areas. A substantial number of States have already committed all their 1956 program funds and have opened their 1957 programs to avoid a serious interruption in their conservation efforts.

Despite these trends, there is evidence (based in part upon a review made in 1955 in 241 representative counties, with one or more in each State) that a

rather large number of farmers in most areas of the country rarely if ever do any direct soil and water conservation work. Another substantial number are known to do conservation work, particularly the more expensive enduring kind, on only an intermittent basis - activity in some years and none in others. Since conservation needs exist on almost all farms, it can be assumed that there is need on most of the farms which do not participate in ACP or other recognized conservation efforts. There is strong evidence that the more alert and financially able farmers do participate in such efforts. Since these participants are above average, it is reasonable to expect that more conservation is needed and less being done on other farms where cost-sharing would likely be needed most.

Recent written releases designed to help inform additional farmers and ranchers who need to increase their conservation efforts, and better to inform professional people in agriculture, as to the facilities available through ACP and other conservation services, include the following (copies attached):

- a. "Better Living Through Conservation Farming"
- b. "Answers to Questions about the Agricultural Conservation Program of Special Interest to Business and Professional People"
- c. Articles which recently appeared in Soil Conservation and Extension Service Review.

#### 6. Trend in Cost-Sharing for Enduring-type Conservation Practices

The following table shows the trend in the use of ACP cost-sharing for a group of enduring type conservation practices:

| Practice                               | Unit | 1952                     | 1953 | 1954 | 1955 |
|--|------|--------------------------|------|------|------|
|  |      | (Rounded to 1,000 units) |      |      |      |
| Dams and reservoirs (storage types)... | No.  | 58                       | 47   | 74   | 69   |
| Leveling land.....                     | Acre | 297                      | 312  | 378  | 375  |
| Standard terraces.....                 | Acre | 958                      | 636  | 728  | 744  |
| Diversion and spreader terraces.....   | Mile | 5-                       | 3+   | 5-   | 5+   |
| Tree planting.....                     | Acre | 101                      | 80   | 116  | 150  |
| Permanent sod waterways.....           | Acre | 51                       | 42   | 34   | 36   |
|  |      | :                        | :    | :    | :    |

Continuing emphasis is placed on the desirability of encouraging conservation practices which give long-term benefits. An effort is made to bring about the establishment of conservation practices which will provide the kind of "balance" necessary to sound systems of conservation farming to give enduring protection of the agricultural resources and renew and maintain its productivity during reasonable use. Examples would include enduring types of practices in combination with sound protective cover and rotations. Water management practices are being installed in many States at a considerably faster rate than heretofore.

Particularly in the case of such practices, most of which require specialized technical skills for layout and installation, specific cooperative efforts have been developed with the Soil Conservation Service, the Forest Service, and

appropriate departments of the Land-Grant Colleges. There has been increasing emphasis on and response from cooperative encouragement of farmers and ranchers who have or can obtain soil conservation district or other conservation farm plans, to carry out those plans. This is particularly true in the case of those participating in organized small watersheds, community-benefit projects, and organized farm and home improvement programs.

Despite this emphasis and effort, in several States and for some practices nationally, there has been little increase or even some reduction in recent years, in the volume performed of several enduring types of conservation practices. (See the table above.) Extra encouragement and incentives for performing such practices in a desirable conservation system of farming have been provided, as follows:

- a. An expanded cooperative effort in conservation education and information has been carried out on an interagency basis in States and counties.
- b. More technical services such as engineering and forestry services and soil testing have been made available to help farmers install practices for which they have requested ACP cost-sharing. Over \$6 million of ACP funds, in addition to funds from other services, were devoted to that use in 1955.
- c. Higher rates of cost-sharing were authorized nationally and offered locally on several of the more urgently needed enduring types of practices from which returns to the farmer or rancher are slowest to accrue.
- d. In many cases, parts of county allocations were earmarked by county committees to give special encouragement to practices which the county advisory group felt should be emphasized.
- e. In some counties, limitations were established on the amount or percentage of county funds which would be authorized for some of the practices in more general use. Several such practices have been dropped out of the program or restricted in their applicability, either nationally or locally.
- f. Particular encouragement was given to group enterprise projects through pooling agreements, to provide cost-sharing for enduring types of practices of community benefit. Parts of some county and State allocations were set aside for this purpose. The Department sought and Congressional approval was given for a much higher ACP payment limit for a person in such cases.

Despite these various incentives, with respect to several practices and in many States, a desirable level of performance of many urgently needed enduring types of practices has not materialized. Even though there has been more interest in the group enterprise type of practice and about double the extent of use in 1955 as compared with 1954, still less than one percent of the ACP payments in 1955 was used for practices in pooling agreements.

Experience for the last three years has demonstrated that taking certain practices out of the ACP offer, or restricting cost-sharing alone on certain practices, has not caused farmers to undertake the application of enduring types

of practices to any substantial extent, even when the extra encouragement and incentives referred to above were provided.

It is obvious that the cost-sharing offer alone does not insure farmer willingness to invest his resources in the more enduring practices to the level needed. Something in addition to the usual cost-sharing approaches (either positive or negative) is required.

#### 7. Emergency Conservation Work in 1956

Substantial programs of emergency conservation work to assist farmers through cost-sharing to solve new conservation problems created by natural disasters are being carried out in 1956 in 16 States. As in the case of the regular ACP, this special conservation effort is directed by the ACPS and is administered in the field by the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation State and county committees. This work is fully coordinated with the regular ACP effort. It helps participants do more than they could through their own resources and the regular ACP to restore to productive use farm and range lands severely damaged by natural disasters. The allocations for assistance by type of problem and the States involved in 1956 are:

Emergency Control of Wind  
Erosion, \$4,604,000

Colorado                         Oklahoma  
Kansas                            Texas  
Nebraska                        Wyoming  
New Mexico

Restoration after Hurricane and  
Flood Damage, \$3,011,826

California                      New York  
Connecticut                     North Carolina  
Massachusetts                  Oregon  
Nevada                          Pennsylvania  
New Jersey

Other requests for allocations are pending.

The Congress has given special authorizations for the use of available funds for these purposes and for restoring a portion of funds for such use which have been advanced to the Secretary from the President's Disaster Relief Fund. It will be necessary to obtain additional authority from Congress fully to repay the funds advanced for this purpose.

#### 8. Conservation Reserve Program of the Soil Bank

With respect to the Conservation Reserve Program practices of the Soil Bank, the ACPS (1) formulates the national program provisions, including rates of cost-sharing and maximum cost-share limitations, (2) reviews and approves the conservation practices for State programs, and (3) develops the operating policies. The practices considered include wildlife conservation practices proposed by the Fish and Wildlife Service of the United States Department of the Interior and State wildlife agencies, along with all of the soil and water conservation practices designated for that program. Other designated agencies offer assistance in these responsibilities. The Agricultural Conservation Program Service (1) assists in developing the operating procedures for administering the Conservation Reserve Program, (2) reviews and appraises the conservation phases of that program, and (3) obtains and makes reports concerning the conservation practices authorized thereunder.

These assignments were made by the Secretary primarily through Secretary's Memorandum No. 1399. In performing these duties the Service has the counsel of a Conservation Reserve Practices Committee which is made up of representatives of the Agricultural Conservation Program Service, Commodity Stabilization Service, Forest Service, and Soil Conservation Service. Representatives of other agencies, as needed, are consulted. Close cooperation is maintained with the Soil Bank Division of the Commodity Stabilization Service.

The usual type of services provided by the ACPS to Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation State offices and to the public, with respect to ACP, is provided with respect to the Conservation Reserve Program practices.

#### 9. Great Plains Conservation Program

Public Law 1021 amended the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 to provide for a Great Plains Conservation Program. This program is intended (through the medium of long-term contracts of up to 10 years and conservation practice cost-sharing, in addition to other authorized programs in the area) "to assist farm and ranch operators to make, in orderly progression over a period of years, changes in their cropping systems and land uses which are needed to conserve the soil and water resources of their farms and ranches and to install the soil and water conservation measures needed under such changed systems and uses."

The ACPS helped formulate the proposed legislation for this program.

#### 10. National Inventory of Soil and Water Conservation Needs

Secretary's Memorandum No. 1396 directed the initiation of a national inventory of soil and water conservation needs. The development of policies and procedures was started early in the year, and the ACPS actively participated in preparatory workshop meetings throughout the country. Our representatives are serving on the Departmental Committee developing plans and procedures for the inventory. This Service has a primary concern in the activity (a) because the legislation under which ACPS has its primary responsibility is designed to help meet soil and water conservation needs in the public interest, and (b) because of the legislative requirement that ACP cost-sharing funds shall be allocated among States essentially on the basis of their respective conservation needs.



